

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) was established in December of 1995 at Temple University. Under the umbrella of Temple's Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE), the LSS operates under contract awarded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement to operate the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, serving the states of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

Given the data reviewed by the panel and the stakeholders interviewed, it appears that LSS has executed the program of work outlined in the technical proposal submitted to ED. The work, overall, has been done in a timely manner. In terms of use of other internal organizational resources, LSS is supported Temple University in several ways. In addition to in-kind contributions, Temple supports LSS by paying the entire salary and benefit cost of the Executive Director. Further, Temple only charges 8 percent of indirect cost to the LSS contract (a reduction of 45 percent).

LSS states that it utilizes a two-pronged approach to meeting its mission mandates and

program goals. The first is a long-term program of applied research and development that focuses on ways to effectively and efficiently bring research-based knowledge and practical know-how to bear on efforts to improve student learning. The second is a broad-based program of outreach and services to the field which connects to and builds on the work of grassroots professionals and resources and the expertise of standing structures, including schools, professional organizations, and other educational and community resources throughout the mid-Atlantic region, focusing particularly on those in the most isolated rural areas and the region's inner cities.

In terms of staffing structure, the Lab has approximately 80 FTE employees, comprised of an interdisciplinary team of researchers from varied fields and support staff. LSS tries to recruit people strategically, drawing from cognitive sciences, developmental psychology, educational administration, learning technology, program evaluation, speech pathology, and teacher education, among others.

Outside of its structure, LSS strives to create a network of collaborating schools and related service provider agencies. Many of the schools are considered “co-developers,” with implementation specialists involved at the schools sites. These individuals include regular and special education teacher, principals, and district level personnel.

LSS, building upon the strengths of the Center for Research on Human Development and Education, has created a dynamic, talented team to carry out the arduous task of their lengthy and complex technical proposal. That they have kept up with the scope of work proposed is admirable.

2. Areas of needed improvement

One of the strongest assets of the Lab may lead to one of its greatest weaknesses in the

future. The leadership of the executive director, which drives much of the success of the Lab in both its programmatic work and its research, constitutes a lion's share of the variance of the Labs tenor with its constituents.

3. Recommendations for improvement

I would suggest that explicit conversations begin soon on how internal capacity can be built around strong, strategic staffing choices so that the dynamic nature of the leadership can be carried out at all levels of the organization.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

LSS has in place a Quality Assurance system for its products and services. This system allows it to engage in self-assessment, utilizing the results to improve overall Lab performance. The Evaluation Unit is responsible for quality assurance and evaluation of the work of LSS. In addition to conducting annual needs assessment studies to ensure the responsiveness of the services LSS provides in the region, the Evaluation Unit is responsible for several other QA processes:

- maintaining the LSS database for documenting the implementation and evaluation of the outreach and services to the field work;
- conducting external reviews of the work of the LSS;
- maintaining an ongoing program of tracer studies to assess the quality and utility of the various professional development and dissemination activities conducted by the LSS staff; and
- conducting product surveys to assess the extent to which the LSS products and tools are use and found useful by its customers.

The Lab's quality assurance plan helps define strategic planning needs. Since the Evaluation

Unit is responsible for maintaining a self-correcting process for the Lab, both formative and summative processes are used. These components include:

- **Product and services evaluation**
Product satisfaction studies, event evaluations, and tracer studies: demonstration of practicality and utility, along with needs assessment questions
- **Needs assessments**
Surveys of teachers, principals, superintendents
- **Internal and external evaluation**
Informal staff feedback, as well as formal reviews conducted by the advisory boards and OERI. The technical review board helps determine the quality and utility of all the LSS work.
- **Outcomes and impact**
The strength in this area surrounds the clearly articulated plans of action made by the evaluation unit for collection and analysis of this important feedback data. Another strength in this area is that Lab members, in particular the Field Services Unit, use the results derived from the data to improve their programming.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

There is evidence that LSS is developing high quality products and services. All of LSS's products and field service work is based on the results of an applied research model. This model of utilizing applied research to determine best practice for fieldwork allows the Lab to minimize duplication with similar efforts.

One example of the applied research work of the Lab (and an example of how the Lab

engages outsiders and experts) is the national study on the effects of school reform in schools with high concentrations of low-income students. This national study involves a multi-disciplinary team of evaluators, and sociologists, psychologists and educational policy scholars. This study is designed to build on the established procedural knowledge base on what the steps are that schools are adopting that seem to be effective in reform. Four other regional Labs are working in this project (AEL, NWREL, SERVE, NCREL). In time, the Lab hopes to provide the resources from the study to all Title I School-Wide (TISW) schools. There are plans to link a new database of all 15,804 schools TISW schools to other national databases, such as NAEP. LSS has created a forum for discussion as a result of this work. LSS organized a number of national invitational conferences, along with publications and reports surrounding the project. Many groups and peer organizations participated in the conference, including RAND, CPRE, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, AEL, NWREL, SERVE.

The LSS network of governing boards provides a safety net for ensuring the quality of the work going out of the Lab. Of note is the mission of the technical review board, which provides quality control over the research and other products created by the Lab. The LSS technical review board is comprised of researchers and practitioners whose fields of expertise include curriculum design, program evaluation, and research design and methodology. Board members review documents related to their own areas of expertise and gauge the potential impact of the work for the target audience of researchers and policymakers.

The Lab does a superb job of collecting data and regularly provides data to the advisory boards and constituents on a number of fronts. All the stakeholders we talked to indicated that the Lab is responsive. Schools, in particular, are able to turn to the Lab for assistance on an ad

hoc basis for nearly any pressing reform need or question. This rapid response strategy has been attributed to the tenor set for the Lab by the executive director.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

Based upon the data reviewed by the panel, it is clear that the Lab provides products and services that are of sufficient size, scope, duration, and intensity to produce sound guidance toward student success efforts. The body of work and associated products known as Community for Learning (CFL) is one example of this. The CFL program is a development project focused on the design and implementation of comprehensive school reform. The panel engaged “customers” of the CFL model, both at school sites and during interview sessions at the Laboratory. All of the feedback suggests that, through CFL, LSS is conducting ongoing interaction with the users of the program, and that the program is useful to its intended audience.

Products and services are deemed useful through the comprehensive efforts of the evaluation unit. A key approaches used by the evaluation unit is the Tracer Study LSS uses Tracer Studies to look at programs that have been in the field for a few months. These Tracer Studies, conducted via telephone, have been conducted in service area concentrations (in large

geographic areas, like Washington, D.C.). Loosely speaking, LSS would ask it's constituents, "We've done an awful lot of work in your area lately. What do you think of our work?" These open ended questions are placed into the questionnaires on field based work and this data is fed back to Jo Ann Manning for use in her division.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

LSS attempts to conduct need finding studies to identify customers and potential customers. Annual needs assessment surveys constitute one of the LSS' primary strategies for listening to its constituents. Drawing upon the report "Spotlight on Student Success" #202, one finds that the goal of the LSS needs assessment surveys is to obtain input on field practitioners need in terms of topics and technical assistance. In the case of the needs assessment for teachers and administrators, the survey consisted of 36 items covering topics from the overall quality of current programs, facilities and practices in the region as well as current and future priorities for school improvement. The data from this and other surveys has been used to inform the Lab in the development of priorities and refinement of the scope of work for the Lab.

Through the standing boards of the Lab, LSS is able to obtain guidance to ensure that it sets priorities in accordance with customer needs, tailors its products and services to intended audience. The Stakeholder Advisory Board provides much input in this area. The Stakeholder Advisory Board is comprised of 16 members, superintendents, teachers, parents and a cross

section of individuals that potentially would be served by the Lab in some way. Meeting four times per year (increased from two meetings per year) this board informs the Lab of needs, issues, and problems of the groups that the board members represent. This board strives to inform LSS of what they can do to be more relevant. As one board member noted, “We inform the Lab of what ‘s out there, and how best to follow through.”

In the area of identification of potential customers, interviews with the stakeholder board suggest that this is an area where the Lab has grown recently. One board member noted that several months ago they determined that there wasn’t enough communication to the regional constituents about what the Lab does. The board member stated that the Lab came to board at a subsequent meeting with an analysis of their current communication plan and behavior, coupled with a new plan to increase communication to the constituent groups, detailing how the Lab would change and improve.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

The bulk of the data related to improved student success that was available to the panel surrounded the impact of CFL. With regard to the implementation of CFL in the Washington

D.C. schools, progress patterns across the four Stanford 9 performance levels for math and reading increased where CFL was in place. In general, findings on program implementation of CFL and student achievement show a continuing pattern of improvement for a two years in a row. On average, CFL schools showed great overall positive change in achievement that other schools receiving targeted assistance from other programs. This is impressive given the high mobility level of the students and the high turnover rate of the teachers in the targeted schools.

Other data generated in the Philadelphia area suggest that the implementation of CFL is a significant contributor to the rate of high school completion among students who participated in the program. In a follow-up study of middle schools students that were in a CFL component, 81 percent remained in high school after leaving the CFL middle school, this in contrast to 40 percent who were in the same middle school, but not exposed to the CFL model.

LSS utilizes a sound model to monitor impact over time, both short and long term. Their work contributes to increased knowledge and understanding of the impact of school wide comprehensive reform, an issue of national significance.

LSS also works to place the foundations for student success within its implementation sites. Quoting one member of the Stakeholder Advisory Board:

The Lab I know is doing an excellent job in New Jersey. As a result of LSS' involvement at the district and state level, at least 4 districts are using the CFL model. Before the state mandate for equity, our test scores were so low that we looked to the Lab as a vehicle to bring change in our middle schools. Beginning in the summer of 1997 we worked with principals and had training for teachers. It hasn't happened overnight, but in 1999 I see changes in school climate and professionalism that wasn't there before. The jury is still out on the test scores, but the alignment of the curriculum is in place. Getting it off the paper and into the classroom is where the Lab comes in. They have very well-trained personnel to bring about change. Jo Ann Manning has done a fantastic job with the principals and stressing the importance of instructional leadership.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The area of documenting the effect of reform strategies on student achievement is a difficult proposition, particularly in areas where many competing initiatives are at work to improve schools. The CFL model, LSS' flagship reform strategy, is in itself a multifaceted approach which deserves the attention of more comprehensive applied research and program evaluation studies on its impact.

3. Recommendations for improvement

I recommend that the work of the evaluation unit be augmented to collect an agreed upon set of student outcomes data that are common to all CFL implementation sites. This data would begin to represent a common framework for reform accountability, yet not infringe upon the research agendas of the individual Principal Investigators who are generally charged with developing the research questions on CFL's student effectiveness. This broader approach (a meta approach, if you will) could serve the Lab well in its attempts to describe its true impact on student achievement.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

LSS seeks out stakeholder group involvement in the LSS program of work, and recruits expertise and resources to compliment and support the LSS program of work. They reach out to connect and establish collaborating networks with practitioner and researcher organizations. The Lab is a leader in national and regional discussions on improvement issues of national significance and on the implementation of next-step strategies to achieve student success. The Lab also attempts to demonstrate ways to target resources and expertise to implement reforms for those faced with most adverse circumstances. One of the goals of the Lab is to figure out how

one can take what works in one community and make it work in another. It's this "procedural knowledge" that they are trying to capture and bring to states and localities.

An excellent example of the Lab's ability to assist stakeholders at the state level involved its work in bringing together state level policymakers for a conference on the issue of teacher recruitment. As a board member stated, "it was good that the Lab was the Ombudsman in this area, and looked at ways in which we should work together on this scarce resource (teachers). Not only on how to recruit (teachers), but what skills they should have, and what should universities be doing in certification and licensure preparation. Now I don't know how you measure in dollars what that conference did, but the value added process of the Lab calling together people who would go separate ways and eventually bump heads, thus making separate state systems; we can now begin to look at collaborative recruitment efforts, using an developing electronic database for recruitment. It was thoughtful, research based, but you got something out of it. When you leave a meeting and you have an action plan and you can do something, that's a success."

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

It is clear that the Lab has made great progress in establishing both a regional and a national reputation in the area of urban school reform. The Lab disseminates research based

information, establish links in the field, assesses reform needs, respond to feedback, targets professional development to support implementation of reform, assist states to sustain reform, and demonstrate effective scale up strategies. All these activities are done a high quality level and have contributed to their reputation.

The Lab is a prolific publishing house, and many of its staff have published work in well-respected outlets. These include, since the Lab's inception, 44 articles and 50 book chapters, 10 books a year, 70 conference papers, and 30 articles in journals or magazines. Not settling only with traditional academic outlets, the Lab distributes videos, planning guides, and manuals as well. They estimate that they have made presentations at 150 sites in the last two years. As for the use of the Internet and World Wide Web, LSS provides downloadable information from their website, hotlinks to relevant sites, and listserv hosting for discussions. An interactive online tool is called "Achieving Student Success" is a popular online reform tool.

In terms of outreach, the Lab sponsors professional development programs through the "State-of-the-Art Seminars," "What Works Workshops," "Advances Study Institutes," and "Principal Forums."

2. Areas of needed improvement

The Lab admittedly needs to improve its reach to grass roots organizations. While connecting to ASCD or NEA is relatively easy for the Lab (via the placement of articles within Educational Leadership or through their special strand at ASCD), there are groups that remain elusive to LSS. An increasing priority is reaching the business community. They have not done as well in that area as in other stakeholder arenas. Their governing board is aware of this and directed the Lab to act in this direction.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Seek strategies to reach out to the business community in meaningful ways.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

After three years the Lab has come to be known for long-term ground breaking research with rigor and sensitivity to practice. They maintain national and regional reputation through urban education, comprehensive school improvement, and resilience promoting innovations. They also conduct national/regional/local implementation studies of significance to policymakers.

LSS is known for state of the art research syntheses on national issues and these help facilitate informed decision making for their constituents. Their data based planning and implementation tools, 20/20 analysis, continues to be cited as a useful tool to building level, district level, and state level school administrators. 20/20 analysis helps schools understand the relationship between demographics and equity, among other things. Importantly, it underscoring the ability of schools to use their own data, not new, fancy information, to facilitate diagnosis and planning.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Broad Concerns

LSS is able to work with schools and sustain the efforts of change. They do this by developing and implementing strategies to significantly improve the region's capacity for bringing effective, research-based practice to scale. The Lab works intensively with schools in demonstrating feasible, effective and sustainable strategies for turning around low performing schools. These strategies manifest themselves in the form of collaborative school reform demonstration projects, technical assistance for databased planning and monitoring

implementations, and professional development programs focusing on (a) implementation and (b) on-going support. The Lab is lauded for serving a high concentration of students from economically and educationally disadvantaged urban and rural communities.